

Attachment E

Overview of Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. Evaluation

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (NHHS) is conducting an evaluation of Employment First, Nebraska's Welfare Reform Program, funded through a "Track II" evaluation grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF). NHHS has contracted with Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) to conduct the evaluation. Under the original plans, MPR was to conduct two studies: (1) an impact study of Employment First's policies against an alternative, called FAST TRACK, in which nonexempt eligible clients were required to first search for employment for 30 days; and (2) two rounds of site visits and reporting on four Nebraska counties for the process/case manager studies. MPR completed the first-round Interim Process and Case Manager Study in September 1999. Because it was not feasible to conduct the impact study as originally planned, we asked MPR to substitute an enhanced Barriers Study for the original impact study.

A. Accomplishments During the Prior Budget Period (July 1999 - June 2000)

This section provides a summary description of research activities and accomplishments during the second year of the evaluation. The major accomplishments during the Manager Studies Report; (2) holding an Employment First summit meeting in Nebraska project's second year include: (1) preparing the Interim Process and Case to discuss and findings from the report and implications of the findings for program design evaluation implementation; (3) preparing the impact study's random assignment design; and (4) redesigning the remainder of the evaluation.

Interim Process and Case Manager Studies Report. MPR submitted the draft Interim Process and Case Manager Studies Report in August 1999. This report summarized program Employment First's objectives, accomplishments, remaining challenges that local welfare agencies and their community partners face as they work to place recipients in employment and attain self-sufficiency, and lessons and guidance on how better to achieve the program goals. The report was based on information obtained from intensive site visits to four Nebraska study sites -- Lincoln, Omaha, Columbus, and Scottsbluff. Importantly, the report identified the key areas for the Service Areas and local offices to improve their performance, and contained recommendations on how such improvements might best be achieved. MPR then revised the report, after addressing comments provided by ACF and NHHS central and local office staff. MPR submitted the revised report (and a stand-alone Executive Summary) to NHHS in September 1999.

Summit Meeting. Reflecting that the process and case manager studies are formative evaluations, NHHS is using the feedback we have received from MPR from the site visit summaries, other memoranda, and, most importantly, the interim report, to correct shortcomings in our welfare reform program across the state. Efforts to improve the program are most focused in Lincoln and Omaha, where challenges are most critical. The Lincoln office formed a Task Force that conducted several planning meetings to address the issues MPR identified in its site visits. The Omaha office is following a similar process to enhance its assessment/choice approach. MPR researchers participated in one of the Lincoln Task Force's meetings in June 1999 to help NHHS staff determine different ways in which Lincoln might ameliorate some of its difficulties implementing case management and addressing other organizational issues.

In October 1999, NHHS held a summit meeting to discuss findings from the Interim Process and Case Manager Studies Report and implications of the findings for the design and implementation of the Employment First program. The conference was attended by NHHS policy makers, NHHS state and service area program operators, representatives from various government agencies, other community stakeholders, and MPR researchers. The meeting began with an introduction of the Employment First Program by Ron Ross, NHHS Director, and a discussion of the history of Nebraska's welfare reform efforts by Dan Cillessen, Administrator of Economic Assistance. Two of MPR's researchers then provided an overview of key findings from the report, highlighting accomplishments and challenges Nebraska faces in implementing welfare reform and identifying local and state-level opportunities for improving the program. After each of the service area administrators provided an overview of their recent program efforts and challenges, the large group separated into four smaller working groups to discuss challenges, goals, and future plans for the Employment First program in four key areas: (1) case management, (2) supportive services, (3) employment preparation activities, and (4) employment retention and advancement. As a result of the summit meeting, participants worked together to identify and prioritize important goals and strategies for NHHS and its partners to take to improve the implementation of the Employment First program.

Evaluation Design of the Impact Study. During the period, NHHS and MPR also worked on developing and refining the research design for the impact study. This design work focused on four critical areas: (1) identifying the administrative data sources and required data elements for the impact study; (2) developing the random assignment design and procedures to be used by NHHS; (3) adapting N-FOCUS to support implementation of the demonstration and random assignment; and (4) developing and refining the job search treatment (called FAST TRACK) to be tested in Omaha. MPR finalized the impact study design report and submitted it to NHHS in September 1999. NHHS and ACF reviewed the report. NHHS central office staff and local Omaha office staff then conducted a series of telephone conference calls with MPR to finalize plans for beginning the FAST TRACK demonstration on November 1, 1999.

Redesigning the Remainder of the Evaluation. Because it was not feasible to conduct the random assignment-based impact study in Omaha, NHHS, with the approval of ACF, asked MPR to reconfigure the remainder of the evaluation, substituting a client survey for the impact study. The Barriers Study will survey a representative sample of Nebraska welfare clients who are single mothers with children to examine their barriers to employment and how these barriers both constrain their employability and influence their experiences with welfare to work activities and supportive services. To compliment the data collected through the client survey, MPR also will conduct a process study that will document and assess the strategies that Nebraska's welfare offices and their community partners are using to address the employment-related barriers that clients face and to support clients in their transition from welfare to work and self-sufficiency. These studies will examine both urban and rural areas and clients in Nebraska. Importantly, they will provide information on clients in rural areas and the service delivery issues most relevant for rural settings.

MPR prepared a draft technical and cost proposal to complete the evaluation and submitted it to NHHS in February 2000. We reviewed the proposal and provided comments. MPR then revised the proposal to reflect our comments and submitted the final version to us in May 2000. In May, MPR began work developing the draft client survey and preparing the sample frame.

B. Accomplishments Anticipated During the Remaining Project Period (July 2000 - January 2002) and Changes to Original Evaluation Plans

This section provides a summary description of research activities we anticipate accomplishing during the remainder of the evaluation. While there are numerous welfare reform evaluation projects being carried out across the nation, relatively few include a focus on the challenges and implications of welfare reform in rural areas. The remainder of the evaluation will consist of a Barriers Study that will inform these and other issues through the conduct of three interrelated components:

1. The ***conduct of a survey of a representative sample of Nebraska welfare clients who are single mothers with children*** to examine their barriers to employment and how these barriers constrain their employability in both rural and urban areas.
2. The ***conduct of a process study*** that will examine and assess the strategies that Nebraska's welfare offices and their community partners are using to address the employment-related barriers that clients face and to support clients in their transition from welfare to work and self-sufficiency.

3. The ***preparation of a synthesis report*** that will integrate findings from the analysis of the client barriers survey with findings from the process analysis of the Employment First program and the service approaches used to address client barriers.

Client Study. For the client study, MPR will survey a sample of approximately 400 welfare clients in Nebraska who are single mothers with children to identify their barriers to employment and their use of formal services and informal support to help them overcome the barriers they face. Both urban and rural clients will be surveyed. Rural clients will be over sampled to enable the study to explore rural recipients and issues. Key research topics to be addressed by the client study include the types and prevalence of employment barriers clients face; the association between clients' barriers and their employment; similarities and differences between rural and urban clients in Nebraska; and the implications of the findings for the kinds of client assessments being performed under Employment First.

The work plan for the client study is organized around five key tasks: (1) study design, (2) sample frame preparation and sample selection; (3) instrument development and testing, (4) data collection and processing, and (5) analysis and reporting. MPR is developing the survey instrument and preparing and selecting the client sample during May 2000 through August 2000. They will conduct the client survey during the four-month period September 2000 through December 2000. Analysis and reporting will occur from November 2000 through June 2001. The draft summary report will be submitted to NHHS in May 2001; a revised, final version, reflecting comments from NHHS and ACF, will be submitted approximately six weeks later.

Second Round Process Study. To complement the data collected through the client survey, the process study will document and assess the strategies that our welfare offices and their community partners are using to address the employment-related barriers that clients face and to support clients in their transition from welfare to work and self-sufficiency. Both urban and rural areas in Nebraska will be studied, with the analysis focusing on how the needs of clients differ in the urban and rural areas and what implications these differences have for service delivery. The process study will be guided by a set of key research questions and supported by a qualitative data collection plan that includes site visits to a variety of communities, focusing on the four areas targeted in the first phase of the process study -- Omaha, Lincoln, Scottsbluff/Gering, and Columbus. To develop as complete a picture as possible of how local offices are addressing client barriers to employment, MPR will collect information using a variety of strategies and by incorporating the perspectives of a diverse set of staff from the welfare office and other community

institutions. The key activities include interviews, focus groups, and case conferences.

The work plan for the process study is organized around four key tasks: (1) study design, (2) site visit protocol development, (3) site visit data collection, and (4) site visit analysis and reporting. MPR will conduct the site visits during the period January 2001 to April 2001. They will then submit the site profile memos in June 2001.

Project Synthesis Report. The final component entails preparing the evaluation's synthesis report. This report will integrate findings from the analysis of the client barrier survey with findings from the process analysis of the Employment First program and the service approaches used to address client barriers. While the client barrier analysis will allow us to identify barriers in Nebraska that most impede clients' employment, the process study will provide a context in which to understand the nature of these barriers and the challenges inherent in addressing them. The synthesis report will be structured around different types of barriers, focusing on differences between Nebraska's rural and urban areas. Innovative service delivery practices that local welfare offices and their community partners are using to address barriers will be highlighted and important service delivery challenges will be identified and assessed. Consistent with providing formative feedback, MPR will suggest approaches for managing these challenges and improving strategies for identifying and addressing the needs of our hard-to-employ welfare population.